

# Victim Assistance

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## Mission

To assist victims and witnesses, and their family members, to treat them with dignity and respect, to keep them informed of adult and juvenile offenders release, or potential releases, to ease the burden of crime victims and to encourage their participation in the criminal justice process.

## Summary of Activities

Each year the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute awards millions of state and federal grant dollars to programs that provide services to crime victims. Money to fund these grant programs come from fines and fees levied against criminal defendants. Federal grant funds are awarded to agencies that provide direct services to crime victims. State victim assistance grant funds go to victim assistance programs operated in Indiana law enforcement and prosecutor offices.



Beyond the emotional suffering, one of the greatest challenges victims of violent crime face is recovering their financial health. The violent crime victim compensation program provides financial assistance to crime victims who have been physically injured and surviving spouses or dependent children of victims who die as a result of a crime. As with the victim assistance grant money, funds for the victim compensation program come largely from fees assessed against offenders at both the state and federal level.

The Department of Correction (DOC) Victim/Witness Services Program notifies victims and witnesses when their offender (1) is scheduled to be discharged, (2) is paroled either in-state or out-of-state, (3) is going on probation, (4) is scheduled for a parole or clemency hearing, (5) is transferred to a minimum security level, a DOC Work Release or Community Transition Program, or (6) escapes or dies.

Victim Assistance Programs also provide other services to crime victims, witnesses, and potential victims such as: (1) crisis counseling, (2) in-person and telephone contact, (3) providing post-sentencing reports, (4) providing support and assistance in the filing of temporary restraining and other protective order, and (5) assisting the victim in filing claims to obtaining compensation.

## External Factors

Many crimes still carry a very deep seeded social stigma - especially crimes involving family violence and sexual assault. Victims of these crimes often are reluctant to come forward and take advantage of the services available. For victims of all types of crimes, services can be fragmented and in the most rural parts of our state may not be available at all. Another factor affecting these services is the nature of the primary funding sources. Because money for both the assistance and compensation funds comes primarily from assessments against offenders, the level of funding can be extremely erratic. Federal grant funds have gone from \$2 million to \$8.5 million to \$5 million in successive years. This financial instability makes it difficult to plan precise victim service programs.

## Evaluation and Accomplishments

In 2002, approximately 6,764 victims and witnesses were enrolled in the Victim/Witness Services Program, and approximately 3,869 victims and witnesses received official notification. The enrollment increase was due partially to education and substance abuse credit time cuts, and juvenile sex offender victim notification.

The Criminal Justice Institute has been administering victim service programs since 1986. In that time it has seen tremendous growth in the interest and commitment to victim services. We believe that even with all the research, programs and legislation that now surrounds victim services there is still lacking a solid assessment of whether the services provided for crime victims match the needs. To assist in answering this question, the Institute hopes to establish a standardized assessment of victimization in our state, including an assessment of the services crime victims need compared to the serviced currently being provided.

## Plans for the Biennium

Several steps have been taken to enhance Indiana's victim compensation program, including an analysis of the victim compensation business process and the development of a database system with which to track compensation applications, facilitate eligibility decisions, make compensation payments, and maximize the efficient flow of work. The Institute charted a comprehensive public awareness and education campaign and these efforts were underscored in findings from an Institute planning survey conducted in December 2002 — 47% of citizens who are aware of Indiana's violent crime compensation program learned about it through a public service announcement, advertisements, or printed materials such as pamphlets and brochures. In addition, most citizens said they would turn to the justice system, a victim services agency, or a faith-based organization for questions and needs associated with crime victimization, including emotional, practical, and financial needs.



An evaluation of the Indiana Department of Correction's Victim/Witness Resource Services Program sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) was conducted in March 2002. The Indiana DOC staff and NIC evaluators worked closely to develop the following four goals for this technical assistance project:

- Develop recommendations to improve the VWSP, utilizing existing resources.
- Review and assess VWSP operations and offer recommendations for improvement
- Address coordination issues among divisions within the DOC and the VWSP, as well as among the VWSP and other system- and community-based victim assistance programs.
- Identify other funding success to support the VWSP.

Based on that evaluation of the program, VWSP is finalizing plans to centralize its VWSP notification services at the Central Office in order to streamline the notification process and ensure that victims don't fall through gaps in the system and services. Also, the VWSP brochure was updated to include a description of the range of services offered by the program and how the program works, as well as referral information for other system and community-based services.

